United Nations A/54/546

General Assembly

Distr.: General
12 November 1999

Original: English

Fifty-fourth session
Agenda item 34
Dialogue among civilizations

United Nations Year of Dialogue among Civilizations

Report of the Secretary-General

1. The General Assembly, by its resolution 53/22, decided to proclaim the year 2001 as the United Nations Year of Dialogue among Civilizations, and invited Governments, the United Nations system, including the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), and other relevant international and non-governmental organizations to plan and implement appropriate cultural, educational and social programmes to promote the concept of dialogue among civilizations, including through organizing conferences and seminars and disseminating information and scholarly material on the subject, and to inform me of their planned activities. The resolution also requested that I present a provisional report on activities in this regard to the General Assembly at its fifty-fourth session, and a final report to the General Assembly at its fifty-fifth session. The present report is submitted in response to this request by the General Assembly. As Member States will recall, a major statement on the subject of dialogue among civilizations was delivered to the General Assembly at its fifty-third session by Seyed Mohammad Khatami, President of the Islamic Republic of Iran. The views of other Member States were sought in a note verbale of 15 September 1999, and are available for review.

2. The present report is provisional in nature and is intended to provide Member States with a brief outline of how I intend to respond to the invitation from the General Assembly to reflect on the idea of a dialogue among civilizations and to seek tangible ways to impact the world community. In August 1999, I appointed Giandomenico Picco as my Personal Representative for the United Nations Year of Dialogue among Civilizations, to assist me in this task. Mr. Picco has already made contact with some regional groups and Governments and will continue these efforts in the future. It has been recognized that, due to the breadth of the concept of dialogue among civilizations and the lack of financial resources, any projects to be pursued would have to be extremely focused and supported by funds from outside the United Nations system.

3. The provisional report of my Personal Representative for the United Nations Year of Dialogue among Civilizations is contained in the annex.

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Annex

Provisional report of the Personal Representative of the Secretary-General for the United Nations Year of Dialogue among Civilizations

I. Conceptual underpinnings

1. The concept of dialogue among civilizations is subject to various interpretations. It is important, therefore, to bear in mind the two major limitations outlined above in order to limit the operational meaning of the concept to something feasible.

2. The concept of dialogue among civilizations has a range of different implications, from a cultural dialogue between Islam and the West to a dialogue among major religions and a cultural-political exchange among the descendants of historic civilizations. This raises other issues: if certain religions are mentioned, why not others? What is a civilization? How many civilizations are there? While all of these questions may be justified and useful, the United Nations may not be the appropriate forum in which to examine them. Indeed, such discussions can open the door to political and cultural misunderstandings that could ultimately lead in the opposite direction from that which the General Assembly membership surely had in mind when it unanimously adopted resolution 53/22. A different approach should thus be pursued.

3. The last 10 years have proven that what is needed is a dialogue which can be both preventive — when possible — and inclusive in nature. The last decade started with a terrible and false prophecy: that wars still to be fought would be among civilizations, cultures, and maybe even religions. That has not happened. There has been no clash of civilizations. It is therefore fitting that the decade should close under a banner of hope: that of dialogue among civilizations.

4. Looking back at the last decade, it is evident that of the many conflicts that have occurred, some were mischievously presented as a clash of cultures, religions or ethnicity. Indeed, it was felt that the common denominator between the wars in the Caucasus, the Balkans and East and West Africa was that they were all born out of the perception that diversity poses a threat. By contrast, the acceptance of the enormous value of diversity and the fact that diversity is the beginning of growth are at the core of the United Nations. This discussion thus provides an opportunity to rediscover the fundamental values on which our organization was solidly founded. The establishment of the United Nations was intended to provide a paradigm of international relations based on inclusion rather than exclusion. It seems appropriate, therefore, to speak, within the United Nations context, of two sets of civilizations: those that perceive diversity as a threat and those that perceive diversity as an integral component of growth. The dialogue should be between these two civilizations or set of civilizations.

II. Admission of reality

5. This Organization can, like any other, contribute to the dialogue among civilizations but surely cannot invent it. Fortunately for humankind, dialogue was invented long ago. Indeed, dialogue exists even where war wages and conflict has created seemingly insurmountable borders between people. Even in such circumstances, the courage and vision of human beings, some of them unknown to those on the outside, has in many instances kept alive the flame of dialogue no matter what real or artificial borders have been erected. The example of those indomitable human beings who have been able to see through the alleged diversity of their neighbours and keep alive the flame of humanity is surely the most effective means of teaching and preaching dialogue. The objective is therefore to identify such examples of human courage, rather than to attempt to teach what we ourselves are perhaps not equipped to teach. Listening is, after all, the most important component of dialogue.

III. Existing work of the United Nations

6. Dialogue among civilizations is not an entirely new concept within the United Nations. Other concepts with similar and complementary purposes and values have preceded it, such as the recent General Assembly resolutions on the culture of tolerance and the culture for peace. The General Assembly, by its resolution 48/126, proclaimed 1995 as the United Nations Year for Tolerance. One of the main outcomes of the consideration of the issue by the Assembly was the Declaration of Principles on Tolerance (see A/51/201), of which the Assembly took note in its resolution 51/95, and article 1 of which defines tolerance as

"respect, acceptance and appreciation of the rich diversity of our world's cultures, our forms of expression and ways of being human ... as harmony of difference".

7. Tolerance is an active principle that thrives on the recognition of human rights and cultural pluralism. It is not the toleration of social wrongdoings and discrimination or the weakening of one's individual beliefs. Rather, it is a way of life that allows one to adhere to convictions freely while accepting that others will adhere to theirs. It is the recognition that human beings are diverse and have the right to live in peace with their diversity while not imposing their beliefs on others. It represents active engagement in democracy and peace. It can help to eliminate prejudgemental attitudes and effectively put an end to violence, extreme nationalism, exclusion and fanaticism.

8. The United Nations Charter calls on all people "to practice tolerance and live in peace with one another as good neighbours". Tolerance is an important basis for the maintenance of a civil society. The premise of tolerance is dialogue and the values of equality, justice, diversity and solidarity with others that naturally flow from it.

9. The General Assembly, by its resolution 52/15, proclaimed the year 2000 as the International Year for the Culture of Peace. A culture of peace, as defined in the programme of action, consists of values, attitudes and behaviour that reflect and inspire social interaction and sharing, based on the principles of freedom, justice and democracy, all human rights, tolerance and solidarity, which reject violence. It is aimed at preventing conflicts by tackling their root causes and solving problems through dialogue and negotiation, as well as guaranteeing for all members of society the full exercise of all rights and the means to participate fully in the development process.

10. The culture of peace can be seen as an important development and a response to those who proposed the theory of the "clash of civilizations" as the new paradigm emerging from the ashes of the cold war. According to this theory, tensions and conflicts between civilizations, cultures and religions would dominate global politics. Contrary to this, the culture of peace is based on the belief that human beings and nations can build a better world through peaceful discourse, mutually beneficial interactions and the definition of common values. In order to promote a wide range of activities in this field, the General Assembly has designated the year 2000 as the International Year for the Culture of Peace, which should prepare the ground for the United Nations Year of Dialogue among Civilizations in 2001. In addition, these two years will be the first ones of the International Decade for a Culture of Peace and Non-Violence for the Children of the World, which will strengthen these concepts and help to embed them in international relations.

11. The above concepts also constitute the basis for switching from a culture of reaction to a culture of prevention, as called for by the Secretary-General in his report on the work of the Organization in 1999 (A/54/1999/1). The majority of recent conflicts in which the United Nations have been asked to mediate or intervene are based on ethnic, tribal or religious grounds. This stresses the need to promote an understanding of and dealing with the root causes of conflict. The culture of prevention encompasses tolerance but it also requires a shared determination and consistent commitment by Governments to set in motion processes of dialogue and mediation to address the underlying causes of potential conflicts before these erupt into wars.

IV. Goal

12. The membership of the United Nations shares a set of common values, as reflected in the Charter. The expansion of that common denominator of values would, by definition, facilitate dialogue, as Member States would share more and more common principles. Some may fear that such an expansion could lead to the domination of the strong. In this regard, the United Nations can play a significant role by seeking to ensure that, in the process of expansion, identities are preserved. Human history continuously develops by carrying on two apparently contradictory trends: integration and local identities have appeared hand in hand in many parts of the world during the last 30 years. This illustrates that the expansion of common values and the strengthening of identities are not contradictory. The message of diversity, as it relates to the United Nations system, can serve as a tool to protect distinct identities, as the common denominator of values which bring us all together expands.

13. The greater the appreciation of diversity, the deeper the sense of identity and the sounder the enlargement of the common denominator of values. These developments will, in turn, strengthen the United Nations system.

14. It would be fitting, therefore, if the spirit of dialogue among civilizations could open the door to a major process of reconciliation in one or more parts of the world. Just as, during the 1990s, many who went to war used the threat of diversity as a justification for conflict, perhaps in the future those who seek peace will use the spirit of dialogue among civilizations as a means to move forward.

15. The Secretary-General has asked me to translate into action the three steps — the conceptual underpinning, the admission of reality and the goal — outlined in the present interim report.

16. I will remain at the disposal of Member States and regional groups to elaborate on the activities that I pursue on behalf of the Secretary-General, and will discuss with UNESCO other actions that it may wish to pursue in cooperation with the Secretary-General.